



COMMERCIAL BUILDING CONSTRUCTED BY 1878

Offices designed for utility company by E. B. White. (Staff Photo by Evans)

Commercial Buildings Monuments To Careers

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Fourth in a series of articles on Charleston's early commercial buildings. The fifth article will appear next Monday.)

By W. H. J. THOMAS

During the 1870s, when the handsome office building at 141 Meeting St. was constructed, it was not unusual to find merchants and builders giving as much attention to the ornamentation of the facades of commercial structures as will be found during any period.

From the middle decades of the 19th century through the 1890s we will find an ever increasing interest in the ornate or "grand" business front that would outdistance similar exterior design of even the elaborate Victorian dwellings the businessmen built for themselves.

As in other American cities during these decades, the merchants of Charleston would appear to compete with one another in creating suitably impressive monuments to their careers. And so the city gained such high-colored commercial units as the now-demolished Moorish fish market, the partially destroyed building on Meeting Street that housed I. Ginsberg, Inc. for many years, and the recently - saved Hindu Gothic bank building on East Bay.

The building at 141 Meeting, now offices for South Carolina Electric and Gas Co., was constructed for the Charleston Gas Light Co. Different sources give the completion date as either 1876 or 1878.

Its classical eclectic front appears suitably tasteful for a utility company that had been in operation for approximately 30 years before it moved to this Meeting Street location.

The history of the firm began in 1846 when the first gas works was erected on

Church Street at a cost of \$115,000 and included six miles of mains. The enterprise appears to have been immediately popular despite general skepticism about this new means of lighting.

We find that at the end of the first year of operation the customers of the utility company numbered 485. The cost to the consumer was \$5 per thousand cubic feet.

The demand for gas increased so greatly in advance of the ability of the company to expand its facilities that a competitor erected a small plant at the foot of Charlotte Street in 1855. This was the Carolina Gas Co., but within

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three years, competition proving so rough on both firms, the two companies amalgamated.

The Civil War proved a source of trouble for the gas industry. Due to the blockade it was impossible to import coal and pine wood was used as a substitute in the retorts. The price of gas was raised to \$3 per thousand cubic feet, Confederate money.

Except for a short period gas was kept on in the town, although the quality was reported to be poor. This condition resulted in a little mild criticism from the local press. One editor facetiously remarked that the company was to be congratulated, as the light of the street lamps was distinctly visible to the naked eye.

With the ending of the war the price of gas for each street lamp in the city was \$22.50 per year. The price of gas to residential customers for lighting was \$10 per thousand cubic feet.

In 1868 a committee was appointed to consider reduc-

tion in the price of gas to consumers. An inspector of meters was elected. He later reported that leakage during the war reached 70 per cent. Before major improvements were made to remove the destruction of the war years, the company would shut off gas in Charleston at midnight because of the conditions of the mains.

The architect chosen to design 141 Meeting was Edward Brickell White, a figure who has left Charleston with so many various works. He is responsible for the design of the French Protestant Church on Church Street, the eastern wing of the old Citadel on Marion Square, Grace Protestant Episcopal Church on Wentworth, the classical Market Hall, the portico and wings at the College of Charleston, the steeple of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and a number of other Charleston landmarks in both classical and gothic styles.

In the utility offices we find White using a nice Palladian design which is so suitable for such a small compact structure.

The building extends back on its lot in three sections before connecting with the quite recent brick additions. That portion flush to Meeting Street is gabled but its slightly taller extension is topped by a slate hipped roof with very gentle bell curves.

The facade is a pleasantly balanced use of Romanized orders, employing Doric columns on the first level, doors and windows in slightly recessed arches, with ornamented mutules under the cornice.

A Corinthian treatment is used by White on the second story, pediments above the windows, and small-scale modillions in the main pediment.